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ABSTRACT

The recent "feminization" of composition theory and pedagogy has replaced the classroom figure of the authoritative father with an image of a nurturing mother. But as bell hooks and others insist, the classroom is inherently a place of struggle and conflict and the "real world" is even more so. Hooks offers concrete alternatives to the usual feminist approach. First, she insists that feminist teachers recognize how their roles as teachers give them power over students. Instead of resisting that power for fear of exercising domination, hooks argues that feminist teachers can use that power in ways that enrich the learning process. Hooks also insists on a unity of theory and practice. Rather than assuming that her approach will speak for itself, she explains to students from day one what will be different (i.e., not politically neutral) about her class. She uses a confrontational classroom style that encourages students to "come to voice" in a risky environment. This contradicts the image of the female teacher as maternal authority figure. And because hooks aims at making education "more rather than less real," she encourages students to relate what they are learning in class to their changing personal identities and then to place their own ideas in a more critical framework. Other feminist teachers affirm hooks' strategies by asserting that power and authority do belong in the feminist classroom and that power and struggle are vital parts of revolutionary feminist pedagogy. (SAM)

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When Teachers Aren't Nice: bell hooks and Feminist Pedagogy

In "Composing as a Woman," Elizabeth Flynn describes recent composition studies as a "feminization" of previous ideas about writing and how to teach it. "In a sense," she says, "composition specialists replace the figure of the authoritative father with an image of a nurturing mother" (423). I have a hard time reconciling this image with some of my memories of female teachers. Take Miss Ortiz, my fifth-grade nightmare, who glared out of octagonal wire-rimmed glasses, smacked knuckles with her ruler, and even rationed our toilet paper. Or Professor King, a feminist instructor for an undergraduate English class. I'd written a paper about Hamlet which said something, apparently wrong, about "internal logical coherence." She returned my paper with "Yuck! This makes me puke!" scrawled in red ink in the margins.

Miss Ortiz and Professor King perhaps misused their power. But does that mean that all use of power and authority in the classroom is bad? Many of us in this "feminized" field associate conflict and authority with something to be avoided, gotten rid of. But as bell hooks and others insist, the classroom is inherently a place of struggle and conflict, and the "real world" is even more so. So how much good are we doing our students by

CS213887

ignoring, trying to smooth over, very real problems and issues? How might we use power and conflict constructively in the classroom? Do feminism and power have to be mutually exclusive?

The "difference" of feminist teaching brings theories about gender difference espoused by Carol Gilligan, Sara Ruddick and others to the classroom, in hopes of challenging traditional patterns of thought and teaching that privilege masculine ways of thinking. Feminist teachers stress process and revision instead of the "male" product. They foster the personal, the subjective, and the tentative instead of the "male" objective, argumentative, and "adversarial" style (see Frey). They stress interaction and connectedness rather than "male" hierarchy and separation. They describe their roles as "friendly advisors" (Flynn, "Learning" 51), as maternal figures who give "loving attention" (Ruddick qtd. in Lamb 16), caring and encouragement to students' thoughts and papers rather than "male" judgment. The classroom, under this feminist model, becomes a safe environment where everyone feels nurtured and able to speak and write, where conflicts are resolved and everyone remains connected.

This vision of feminist pedagogy has made important contributions to the field; most of us probably recognize that. I agree with many of its goals, and use them in my teaching. The problem is that the utopian image of a caring atmosphere has little to do with dynamics of power and conflict which are inherent to the classroom. "Maternal thinking" can't alter the

facts: we are still teachers, and our students are still students. Removing signs of authority and struggle will do nothing to alter the powers invested in us by the social and institutional politics of the educational process itself (Finke 7). As Laurie Finke observes, a nonauthoritarian feminist pedagogy can end up "mystifying the very forms of authority" it seeks to exorcise. The teacher may start out as a nurturer, but at some point stands back and gives grades (22). This contradiction can "cause more distress than empowerment" (15); it's neither honest nor fair to pretend that we've given up all our authority. In short, we can't turn the classroom into a classwomb. And we shouldn't even try.

If smoothing over issues of power, conflict and struggle is both impossible and undesirable, how should we handle them? How can we use power and conflict constructively in the classroom? What does a feminist pedagogy that acknowledges, even focuses on, struggle look like? Here's where I turn to bell hooks. In her 1989 book, Talking Back, hooks applies Paolo Freire's idea of "education as the practice of freedom" to feminist pedagogy. In order to make education truly revolutionary, a practice of freedom, feminist pedagogy should engage students in a learning process which is "more rather than less real" (51). For hooks, "more real" means admitting that "education is not a neutral process" (64). "More real" means a classroom "where there is a sense of struggle, where there is a visible acknowledgement of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as

teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university" (51). It means, in short, preparing "students to live and act more fully in the world. . . outside the classroom" (103).

So how do we make our classrooms more real? Hooks offers concrete alternatives to the traditional feminist approach. First, she focuses on, rather than ignores, the power discrepancy inherent to the teacher-student relationship. Hooks insists that we recognize how our roles as teachers give us power over our students. Instead of resisting that power for fear of exercising domination, hooks argues that feminist teachers can use that power in noncoercive ways to enrich the learning process (53). This means abdicating the traditional throne of all-knowing professor, but letting students know we are prepared and involved as teachers (52). Patricia Bizzell sees hooks's position as a solution to the dilemma of politically committed teachers who "want to serve the common good with the power we possess by virtue of our position as teachers, and yet. . . are deeply suspicious of any exercise of power in the classroom" (54). Bizzell asserts that hooks rejects not only "'traditional ways of teaching that reinforce domination,'" but also a "simple inversion" of this pattern, where the teacher becomes entirely passive. "Hooks seeks a form of legitimate power in the classroom, and it seems that she persuades her students to grant authority to her" (64).

How does she get this legitimate form of power? This is

hooks's next strategy. She talks about her pedagogy with her students from the first day. Rather than assuming her approach will speak for itself, she discusses her goals, her strategies, and her expectations. She sees it as important for feminist teachers to explain what will be different about their class, and insist that students think about whether or not they want to be in the class (54). Again, rather than pretending that the classroom is politically neutral and unqualified fun, it is more honest and more effective to disclose the agenda, the rules, and the power relationships which pervade any classroom. As Bizzell notes, once hooks persuades her students to grant her authority, she uses her power to facilitate learning and liberation.

In class, hooks uses a confrontational classroom style, encouraging students to "come to voice" in a risky environment. Here's how she explains it:

> Unlike the stereotypical feminist model that suggests women best come to voice in an atmosphere of safety (one in which we are all going to be kind and nurturing), I encourage students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk. The goal is to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion. (hooks 53)

She sees that getting used to this approach can be difficult for both students and teachers. It's hard to give up being liked and affirmed, she says. Women in particular are expected to be nurturing and kind (169); as Jill Eichhorn reflects, "As a

woman,. . . I become a symbol of maternal authority to my students. They expect me to be nice, loving, nurturing--and feel betrayed when I am not" (308). But hooks resists this pressure, insisting that education which challenges and even threatens students' assumptions and beliefs is often neither entertaining nor fun (103). On the other hand, having fun and liking your teacher, under this model, aren't valid measures of success (53). What about learning as a more appropriate measure? As she says, if a primary goal of this pedagogy is to

> prepare students to live and act more fully in the world, then it is usually when they are in that context, outside the classroom, that they most feel and experience the value of what they have. . . learned. For me, that often means that [the] most positive feedback I receive as a teacher comes after students have left the class and rarely during it" (103).

Finally, because hooks aims at making education "more rather than less real," she encourages students to relate what they are learning in class to their changing personal identities. This move often creates conflict into the classroom. When writing about Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye some students may reveal pain and victimization, while others may express racist or sexist ideas (54). Hooks helps them place their ideas in a more critical framework. Conflicts become the focus of learning here. Min-Zhan Lu supports this approach, arguing that using conflict helps students evaluate their struggles as they "reposition

themselves in the process of reading and writing" (888). Other feminist teachers have recently begun to explore the use of conflict in the classroom; see the October 1992 edition of CCC magazine for more on this. As Adriana Hernandez puts it, "the feminist classroom. . . provides the arena to analyze contradiction, identification, and resistance" (Eichhorn 321).

Hooks maintains that we must continually try out new methods and approaches in developing a revolutionary feminist pedagogy (54). This has to be a collective effort; we must learn from each other. In this spirit, I'll share some of my own experiences applying her ideas in the composition classroom.

Pedagogy is a focus in my classes from the first day. Along with a syllabus, I give my students a handout which spells out my expectations and approach. I encourage disagreements here; my handout reads, "I expect and hope to see many differences of opinions come up...; while I think disagreements can be healthy and productive, I expect that we all respect each others' ideas and feelings." About in-class discussions, I stress participation, saying that "I want to make sure no one (including me) monopolizes the conversation." I reinforce these ideas both in class and during conferences with students throughout the semester.

Being up-front about my beliefs and agenda is also important to my approach. Part of the "Writing about Literature" course at the University of Arizona focuses on reader response. I use myself as a model to illustrate how a reader's background affects

the ways they respond to and interpret literature. To introduce this approach, I offer my students a "free-for-all" session in which they can ask me about my personal life, with the provision that they can only ask questions they wouldn't mind answering themselves. This semester they let loose: "What music do you listen to? Who'd you vote for? What do you think about abortion? What kinds of sexism have you experienced? Are your parents divorced? What do you think about marriage? about interracial dating? How did you react to the L.A. riots? Where have you lived? What does your research focus on? What do you think about teaching?" and on and on. I answered questions for over half an hour, all the time asking them to think about how my experiences and beliefs would influence my reaction to a given story. I told them, "We're all used to thinking that our instructors are unbiased, wise, and have never made a mistake in their lives. But we're all opinionated and political, even if we don't admit it." Students got a clear sense of how my background and politics influence not only how I read, but how and what I teach.[1]

I try to be honest about my beliefs and biases, and I encourage students to do the same. It's not always easy. Last summer I gave my class, all minority students fresh out of high school, an essay called "La Guera" by Chicana lesbian feminist Cherrie Moraga. Moraga focuses here on the pain of denying her ethnicity and her sexuality. Her essay provoked conflict and thought, both within and among students. Sonia's journal says it

better than I ever could:

> I have to admit, that when I first heard/read of her being a lesbian, I didn't want to finish reading her essay. My first thoughts were, "Ew that's gross". . . . I put down the reading and thought for a minute about why I didn't want to read her essay. This is what I came up with. For me, homosexuality is not normal. Then I figured that I may not agree with her lifestyle but I can respect others' choices and give her writing a chance. I read James Baldwin's work and liked it and didn't have any objection to his preference. . . . What I thought was weird was that I saw nothing wrong with Baldwin's sexuality and saw everything wrong with Moraga's sexuality. I suppose it may be normal to feel that way; it just felt sort of awkward.

This was not exactly a pleasant read for Sonia, but she used her reaction to analyze her assumptions about sexuality. She didn't necessarily resolve them--that's not what I expect--but she started thinking about contradictions in her own attitudes.

And some of the conflicts about Moraga's essay got played out in class. David, an especially vocal student, had insisted from the first day of class that "too many people have tried to keep us minorities apart--we have to stick together." But Moraga was a different story for him. "She needs to go into counseling," he repeated again and again. I put him on the spot. "David," I said, "you've talked for weeks about how awful prejudice is, how people should stick together. I want you--no

one else--to explain right now how your reaction to Moraga is different from the prejudice you hate so much." The whole class got involved. Pretty soon Nydia, who had never yet said a word in class, jumped in. "Moraga says it's the same whether someone's being beaten because they're black or because they're a lesbian, David!" She wouldn't let him off the hook--a major victory for someone who was in high school before she found the nerve to say hello to anyone. This wasn't exactly a safe environment, or a "safe" topic, but my confrontational style provided a model for my students to follow. It didn't stifle Nydia (or David, for that matter), but instead showed her that it's okay to disagree and stand up for yourself.

I won't go so far as to say I'm never nice in class, or to pretend that my students are all afraid of me. But I will say, with bell hooks, that power and authority do belong in the feminist classroom. That conflict and struggle are vital parts of revolutionary feminist pedagogy. My students may not always feel comfortable with what they read, say or hear in my class. But they're thinking, learning, and changing. And that's what I want. After all, I'm not their mother. I'm their teacher.

Notes

1. Of course, the politics, meaning, and consequences of this exercise are complicated: for a middle-class, white heterosexual woman like me, discussing my personal life may be different from (and simpler than) the experience of women or men whose class, race or sexual orientation receive less social privilege and approval.

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